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BRAC votes package deal

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Redstone decision could bring 1,755 new federal jobs

The majority of the nation's missile defense work will land in Huntsville if the recommendations of the nine-member Base Realignment and Closure Commission, or BRAC, panel passes muster at the White House and on Capitol Hill next month.

The bulk of the Missile Defense Agency's development and management work, along with the headquarters of the Army Space & Missile Defense Command, would move to Huntsville under a recommendation the BRAC panel passed Thursday.

On Wednesday, the BRAC panel also approved moving the headquarters of the Army Materiel Command to Redstone.

The moves will net at least 1,755 new federal jobs for the area, said Dave Hargrove, incoming president of the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce. "That's the official number given by the Pentagon in May, and, although we are hopeful more contractor jobs will follow, I think that's the prudent figure," he said.

Bringing the headquarters of AMC and SMDC to Huntsville, which has long been the headquarters for the Army Aviation and Missile Command, would elevate Redstone's stature as a key site for the Army. It could also make Huntsville home to several more Army generals.

The Army Materiel Command, which is the parent command of Redstone's Aviation and Missile Command, is headed by four-star Gen. Benjamin Griffin. Griffin's command staff also includes a three-star general and a couple of two-star generals.

SMDC is helmed by Lt. Gen. Larry Dodgen, a three-star general who lived in Huntsville for two years as the commanding general of Army Aviation and Missile Command. AMCOM is headed by a two-star general, Maj. Gen. James Pillsbury.

"This is what we have been working for a number of years, and, of course, we are just ecstatic and very happy over these decisions," said Tennessee Valley BRAC Committee co-chair Joe Ritch. "It's been a very, very good week for Huntsville" and the Tennessee Valley.

Hargrove said the number of contractor jobs that would follow the federal work has not been verified. But unofficial estimates have ranged from 2,000 to 3,000 contractor jobs. Lt. Gen. Trey Obering, head of the Missile Defense Agency, said during a recent appearance in Huntsville that MDA alone could bring more than 2,000 workers here.

Hargrove said the "lion's share of the (BRAC) work is now complete," but Tennessee Valley BRAC Committee members will now monitor issues that might crop up while the official report is written and forwarded to the White House and Congress.

"I'm telling people that the real celebration will come later" in the year, Hargrove said. "We are very happy today, and we don't expect problems, but there are still two very important hurdles left to clear."

The BRAC panel will forward its complete report to President Bush by Sept 8. The president must accept or reject the recommendations as a whole.

The panel also approved two recommendations that would move work from Redstone - a munitions and ordnance school and a robotics office.

Under the panel recommendations, Redstone would lose the Army Munitions, Ordnance and Electronics School, with about 900 Army students and 95 military instructors and other workers. The school was established in 1953 to show soldiers how to use the missiles being developed at the arsenal.

All the recommendations will have to be approved by President Bush and the full Congress.

"Today is a good day for Redstone and all of North Alabama," said U.S. Rep. Bud Cramer, D-Huntsville.

"I welcome these significant additions to our community and look forward to working with them during their transition. While I am excited about today's actions, we must continue to remain watchful as the BRAC Commission decides on the remaining recommendations for Redstone."

U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Tuscaloosa, also gave the plan his stamp of approval.

"I am pleased that Redstone Arsenal will be the new home to the Army Materiel Command headquarters. Moving AMC's headquarters to Redstone Arsenal will result in cost savings and co-location with similar missions," Shelby said in a prepared statement.

"I look forward to welcoming (AMC commander Gen. Benjamin Griffin) and the command headquarters to Huntsville."